<Book Reviews> Reading Bangkok. ROSS KING. Singapore: NUS Press, 2011, 272p.

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CITATION:

Loh, Kah Seng. <Book Reviews> Reading Bangkok. ROSS KING. Singapore: NUS Press, 2011, 272p.. Southeast Asian Studies 2012, 1(2): 339-341

ISSUE DATE:

2012-08

URL:

http://hdl.handle.net/2433/167292

Online International. Accessed December 1, 2011, http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,799237,00.html.
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Reading Bangkok

ROSS KING

Singapore: NUS Press, 2011, 272 p.

Two long-standing issues in modern Thai history lie at the heart of *Reading Bangkok*: the country's independence and authoritarianism. "Was Thailand really independent?" is a question that has engaged numerous historians, as has why the country has struggled to attain democracy since the 1932 coup that ended the absolute monarchy. Architectural scholar Ross King uses these questions as a point of departure to unravel the contested cultural meanings of the built landscape of Bangkok, the capital city.

King uses the concept of "screens," which are ways in which colonization (of and by Thailand) and authoritarianism (rationalized by the state ideology, Nation, King, and Religion) are hidden and legitimized. The screens are placed over reality so that we see what Thai elites want us to see: Thailand's modernity, a policy that the Chakri kings had adopted since the nineteenth century. Screens distinguish between appearance and reality, but also create a suspicion that nothing in Bangkok is ever what it seems. The ontological blurring of the city is a result of King's method.

King does not think that Thailand was independent except in the limited political sense. But he complicates the issue by arguing that, while the country had been colonized by Western, Chinese and Indian capital, the Chakri kings had also colonized territories on the periphery of old Siam and adjacent to it. There is also a "reverse colonization" at work, where rural Thais brought to Bangkok to construct public works settled down in the city before participating in recent mass protests against the establishment. King's response to the second question is more straightforward. Thailand, he notes, remains in the grip of state ideology, although there are signs that its hidden status and hold are weakening due to the advent of new media and the centrifugal effects of globalization.

With these premises, King proceeds to deconstruct the built spaces of Bangkok, some historical, some well-known to outsiders, others less so, but all interesting. *Reading Bangkok* is divided into five chapters, which move spatially from the political center (Thonburi, the early capital founded in 1767 by King Taksin) to the intellectual periphery (the universities). In each chapter, King peels away screens to reveal what he calls "levels of colonization," showing a disjuncture between form and history, the diminishing of traditional life, the homogenizing work of state policies, and the impact of international capital.

In the first chapter, "Landscapes of Illusion," King unpacks the historic places of Thonburi,

Kudijeen and Rattanakosin. He ignores the rebirth meta-narrative (Siam rising from the sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767) to emphasize the imperialist origins of modern Thailand. It was Taksin who seized the Emerald Buddha, an important symbol of kingship, from Vientiane in order to establish his divine right to rule, while the next king, Rama I, asserted Bangkok's suzerainty over Ayutthaya's former vassals. In addition, through a survey of architectural spaces in Thonburi and Rattanakosin, King views the mix of Thai, Portuguese, Khmer, Chinese, Catholic, and Muslim influences to be merely screens for the state's continuing pursuit of ethnic and cultural purity. The eclectic architecture is not, he emphasizes, instances of an organic hybridity.

From political matters the book moves to issues of economic domination. Chapter 2, "Landscapes of the Modern Age," explores Charoen Krung, Silom and Ratchadamnoen, parts of Bangkok that were developed as the early rulers sought to modernize Siam's economy in light of the threat of Western colonial aggression. On the one hand, King highlights examples of the power of Western, Chinese and Indian capital then and now. On the other, he traces the disappearance of traditional *khlong* (canal)-based social and economic life, as road and rail gained ascendancy in the capital.

Chapter 3, "Libidinal Landscapes," discusses Sukhumvit, well-known for its shopping and entertainment spaces but particularly for the sex tourism at Patpong. King discusses the subculture and discourse of cross-dressing in Thailand, which conflicts with the official policy of fixing gender distinctions. He also contrasts the wealth of Sukhumvit and the great slum of Khlong Toey on the eastern fringe. King paints the slum as a vast liminal world of low-wage and non-wage workers, beggars, prostitutes, and vendors, all controlled by syndicates.

Khlong Toey is further analyzed in part of the fourth chapter, "Landscapes of Ruin." King attempts to go beyond the frame of the dangerous slum by referring to its social vibrancy and its ability to resist unjust state policies and achieve a compromise with land-sharing. He then explores the ruins of Ratchadapisek, or more accurately, the unfinished skyscrapers following the flight of foreign capital during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis.

The final chapter, "Landscapes of the Mind," takes issue with the failure of the Western intellectual tradition and prevalence of self-censorship in Thailand. Drawing upon his experiences with Thai architectural students, King laments the absence of a critical intellectual discourse.

Reading Bangkok is a good read in many ways. Although the use of theory and amount of local detail make reading a challenge, it is, nonetheless, delightful to uncover grim histories underneath bright façades. I enjoyed the unpacking of the Democracy Monument, whose ambivalent history in commemorating the elite-led coup of 1932 has not prevented its appropriation by pro-democracy activists as a rallying site in the protests of 1973, 1976 and 1992. The concept of reverse colonization also usefully problematizes the rural-urban distinction and helps explain the nature of recent street politics in Bangkok.

However, the book is not without its problems. King removes the screens but does not assess

their effectiveness, or how far Thais are aware of them. The book's main weakness is that it is written from an outsider's perspective, with very few insights into how the city is read by its residents. Disappointingly, King dismisses the slum as a screened world, where informality masks the organization and exploitation of poverty. Where he acknowledges social dynamism, it is through the eyes of activists, rather than dwellers. Yet, research on slums and informal settlements in Southeast Asia and beyond has shown how the residents are often able to contest official policies and chronic hazards on an everyday basis, albeit in passive ways (see Roy and AlSayyad 2004; Bankoff 2003; Guinness 2009; Akin 1975; Jellinek 1991). A social history of the slum—and, in more general terms, of Bangkok—is missing from the book. This paints the capital in an overly harsh, unflattering light. The same problem applies to King's conclusion that Thai intellectuals are steeped in self-censorship because they do not voice their opinions within classroom.

To be fair, King acknowledges the limitations of his sources and his position as a foreigner; he also concedes that Thais may express intellectual contention in different ways from Western students. *Reading Bangkok*, then, is also useful for how it raises unanswered questions and paves the way for future scholarship on the contested spaces of the city.

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Queer Bangkok: 21st Century Market, Media, and Rights

PETER A. JACKSON, ed.

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2011, xi+308 p.

The project of decentering Western experiences in theorizing the issues of gender and sexualities has led concerned scholars to consider and include the experiences of "Other," i.e., non-Western,